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ABSTRACT

Students dislike writing essay examinations as much as teachers dislike reading them. Perhaps no alternatives to the essay exam exist, but certainly the task can be lessened by altering the format of the essay exam. In an education class at a California university, students select in advance one essay question from a list of several, and field test their rough drafts in a peer revision group. They then rewrite their essays and submit them to the instructor with the rough draft and the peer group comments. Each question is composed of three parts: (1) the message, or subject matter to be assessed; (2) the voice, the point of view and emotional tone the student must assume in conveying the message; and (3) the audience, the specific individual to whom the student is writing. The interrelationship among the message, voice, and audience makes the essay examination experience more challenging and moves it into the realm of real-world communication. Instructors evaluate each essay on a ten-point scale and students then show the instructors' comments to the peer evaluators for contrast with theirs. Over the course of two or three essay examinations of this type, the peer evaluation group members become more helpful to one another. This use of voice and audience constraints in the writing of essay examinations turns an otherwise torpid activity into a vital learning process. (Examples of questions with the voice, audience, and message delineated are included.) (HTH)

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CS 209 954

Using Voice and Audience in Essay Examinations

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Education 174B, Writing in the Content Areas,is, at my institution, required of all secondary school student teacher candidates. It is potentially a volatile if not downright dangerous situation for the instructor. The English and history majors are nice, but the math majors glare, tje French majors shrug and make faces, while the microbiologists mutter inaudibly and curse audibly. It's not easy convincing these hardened rebels that writing might be an important process in their discipline, especially when they are required to show what they do not want to know in, of all things, an essay examination.

Students hate to write essay examinations just as much as we hate to read them. For the student, an impending essay examination connotes cramming, uncertainty, and apprehension. For the instructor, it means hours of reading material already known. In an important sense, the essay response, ranging from the two sentence answer to a study guide question to a six hour doctoral comprehensive examination, is an artificial, if not strained, form of discourse. National surveys of student writing practice in both England (Britton and others, 1975) and the United States (Applebee, 1981) reveal the preponderance of informational writing in all content areasisdirected to the teacher as examiner. Similar surveys of higher education would yield similar findings. The pupil/examiner context (Britton, 1975) requires students to tell us what we already know; as reader-sleuths we search for clues that suggest the degree of competence with which the information is being conveyed. Perhaps no

alternatives to this ancient practice exist, but, certainly, the drudgery for both the student and instructor can be lessened by altering the format of the essay examination.

REDUCING STUDENT APPREHENSION

The most available alternative to the essay examination is the short answer or recognition examination. However, those of us who lecture on the power of the written word cannot, with straight face, assess resultant student knowledge using multiple choice items. Another option is to publish a range of essay questions from which one or two will be drawn at random by the instructor at the time of the examination. I use a more extreme approach: Each student selects from a list of questions one in advance. I try to reduce apprehension further by allowing students to field test their rough drafts in a peer revision group. Subsequently, they must rewrite their essays and submit them to me with the rough draft and the peer group comments.

FRAMING THE QUESTIONS

Each question is composed of three parts: message, voice, and audience. The message is the subject matter that is to be assessed, the knowledge gained from the literature review. Voice is the point of view and the emotional tone that the student must assume in conveying the message. The audience is the specific individual to whom the student is writing. The interrelationship among the message, voice, and audience make the essay examination experience more challenging, by moving it into the relam of real world communication. Here is one of the questions:

VOICE An angry, informed parent of a gifted child(specify age)

AUDIENCE Your child's teacher

MESSAGE Your child has been given a writing assignment to perform with little preparation. The child is bewildered and confused, has sought help but none has been forthcoming. Explain to the teacher what

could have been done to help the student.

CHALLENGE TO WRITER AND PEER GROUP EVALUATORS

Many students in class like this question. The older students who are parents have experienced the situation of helping their children write a "ten page paper on rocks." Younger students recall the experience firsthand. The letter to the teacher, for the busy parent, is an effective alternative to the phone call or the conference. In the letter, the parent must demonstrate an understanding of teaching strategies involved in the writing process--prewriting, revising, editing techniques. The problem is to merge the message with the appropriate tone and language, and this becomes the substance of the peer review. Eavesdropping on these discussions, I hear such comments as "My child is gifted, and I had this very thing happen to me. I don't think you are angry enough. The teacher won't respond to a letter of this kind unless you show more power" or "As a teacher of gifted students, I think this letter would make me so angry that I would probably try to flunk your kid" or "You don't seem to say much about teaching strategies. The purpose of this letter was to give the teacher some advice." Some intricate communication problems arise out of this assignment depending upon the stance the parent would take.

THE ANGRY DECLARATION OF WAR. Some letters were openly aggressive. They contained such expressions as, "My good woman, where did you get your teaching credential?" or "Do you have any idea what you are doing to your students?" or "The superintendent and school board are receiving a copy of this very letter." The problem with the declaration of war, as I try to point out, is that it severs communication with the teacher and, consequently, no working relationship could develop. This was astutely pointed out to the student who began his letter with "Dear Asshole."

THE ANGRY CONSTRUCTIVE STANCE. Another approach students take is to show anger but temper it with an offer to help. One student began this way: "For

the past two weeks Melva has come home in tears over the science report you are having the students do. As you know, Melva is gifted and has an excellent school record, but with this assignment she is beginning to doubt her ability. Also, she says that she has tried to talk with you several times about the problem but that you always are busy doing something else. I know how elementary teachers are overworked--I am one myself. Perhaps, you could...." A letter of this kind would tend to promote some sort of working relationship that would benefit the child.

Another problem experienced in this question was how to communicate technical information about the writing process in this letter. Here the student had several choices.

PARENT AS AUTHORITY. First of all, students had to realize that a busy teacher would pay little heed to suggestions from "just a parent." To make the letter work, the parent had to establish some authority. Students who successfully dealt with this problem wrote things like,"As you may know, I am getting my teaching credential. One of the courses that I am taking as called "Writing in the Content Areas," taught by the brilliant Professor Donlan (They get high grades for this kind of comment). He was saying in class the other day that...." Another student wrote, "I am an English teacher of twenty years experience, and I, too, find report writing hard to deal with. After many bad assignments, I hit upon some good ideas. Have you ever tried...?"

PARENT AS LAYPERSON. A student could effectively write a letter of this kind by talking in layperson's terms about the writing process. One student handled it this way: "I remember that when I was in sixth grade my teacher made report writing seem easy by teaching us the process step by step. First, she...."

ACCURACY. Correct spelling, punctuation, and appropriate usage became an important part of the letter. As was pointed out in one of the peer groups,

"No teacher is going to pay attention to advice from someone who cannot give it clearly and accurately."

EVALUATION

Each essay is evaluated on a ten point scale. Four points are awarded for the content of the letter and 2 points each for voice, audience, and accuracy of language. Although the evaluation is based on the final draft, students must submit the rougn draft and the comments from each of the members of the peer review committee.Each evaluation is accompanied by a half page typed comment that addresses, specifically, each of the four basic elements—message, voice, audience, and accuracy of language. Students show my comments to their peer editors for contrast with theirs. Over the course of one quarter and two or three essay examinations of this type the peer evaluation group members become more helpful to one another.

OTHER TOPICS

What follows are additional topics which students have chosen and which have produced substantive discussion in peer evaluation groups:

VOICE Teacher of one year's experience
AUDIENCE President of a computer software firm
MESSAGE You are disillusioned with the available software for teaching writing in your content field. Describe what you would like to have as well as current programs that are not providing for your needs.

VOICE Chairperson of a large school district textbook committee
AUDIENCE Content area textbook distributors in your area
MESSAGE A form letter clearly designating criteria for effective writing assignments presented as end of chapter activities.

VOICE A student teacher about to assign a series of library reports to a group of bright but unmotivated students

AUDIENCE School librarian who will supervise students' time in the library

MESSAGE In your absence, the school librarian will be helping these students while you are working with the rest of your class in your own classroom. You need to describe what the students are to do in the library, how you have prepared them for work in the library, and what you want the eventual final product to look like.

VOICE A writing specialist

AUDIENCE A teacher of learning handicapped students

MESSAGE Write an informal note in response to a request for some basic classroom activities to improve student writing ability

I have found that including voice and audience constraints in the writing of essay examinations has turned a torpid activity into a vital process.

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